



Enhancing EFL Teaching Practices through Targeted Professional Development: Insights from Classroom Observations in Higher Education

(Received on November 15, 2025– Accepted on April 18, 2026)

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Abstract

Professional development is the door for every teacher to acquire the latest approaches in the teaching process. It has been given the greatest importance, especially in promoting teaching changes and development. This research aimed to investigate the strengths and weaknesses of EFL teachers in higher education using a classroom observation tool. It also aimed to design a proposed professional development program for EFL teachers based on the discovered weaknesses. The current study adopted a qualitative approach with a thematic analysis design. The data was collected from 27 EFL teachers and was analysed through a deep, qualitative thematic analysis of the classroom observation feedback of EFL teachers done by four observers. The results of this research indicated that EFL teachers used various successful teaching techniques, careful selection and exploitation of supplementary audio-visual materials, concise lesson delivery methods, as well as effective teaching characteristics that led to effective communication and involvement. However, deficiencies in proper lesson planning, controlling a classroom, integrating technology into a lesson, engaging students, and addressing specific language skills were seen. Finally, the study recommended a continuous professional development program that can enhance teachers' instructional methodologies, promote effective classroom control, and employ creative methods of teaching.

Keywords: Professional development, classroom observation, EFL teachers, higher education, teacher education

Introduction

EFL teachers of higher education face unique challenges in their instruction, such as handling students of varying language proficiency, culture, and purpose. To counteract these challenges, EFL teachers must undergo ongoing professional development that addresses their instructional practices and enhances their pedagogical competencies. Perhaps the most significant goal of professional development for university EFL teachers is to stay abreast of the latest in their field, keeping their expertise up to date, as well as to learn new teaching techniques and practices in order to improve their own instructional habits and thereby their students' achievement. Professional growth can assist teachers in getting acquainted with the latest advancements in the area and enhance their knowledge base and pedagogy (Zein & Fautley, 2021). This may involve acquiring knowledge on the latest trends in language teaching, such as task-based language teaching, content and language integrated learning (CLIL), or the integration of technology into the classroom.

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The other notable professional development goal is to strengthen the teacher's ability to meet the needs of their students, particularly students with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. It is a matter of learning culturally responsive pedagogical strategies or of learning to meet students with different levels of language proficiency (Alqarni, 2021; Haukås et al., 2022). Overall, professional development is necessary for EFL higher education teachers to maintain their teaching standards and adjust to the new demands of the profession. Professional development can take different forms in higher education EFL teaching, including workshops, conferences, online courses, mentoring, and class observation.

One of the methods that has, in the recent past, been employed to promote EFL teachers' professional development is classroom observation (Unissa & Alhasan, 2024). Classroom observation is a well-established practice of teacher professional development. It can be a powerful tool in professional development, providing teachers with accurate feedback on teaching. This feedback can help teachers identify areas in which they are performing well and areas where they should improve. It can offer them specific suggestions for the improvement of teaching, facilitate reflective practice, and maintain their continuous professional development (Siddiqua, 2019). In recent years, classroom observation has received more interest as a method of professional development of EFL teachers in higher education. It has been stimulated in part by the recognition that quality teaching is a student success determinant, and ongoing professional development is required for upholding and promoting quality teaching (Acar et al., 2023; Handayani & Fithriani, 2024; Rozimela et al., 2025).

However, there are also potential problems concerning classroom observation. For example, teachers can be nervous about being monitored or may think that comments by observers do not apply to their classroom context (Reños & Pontillas, 2024). Furthermore, the observer's own perspectives and biases may influence the comments they provide. Consequently, it is necessary to acquire the knowledge of how classroom observation may be appropriately used as an instrument of professional growth for EFL teachers in higher education. That is, it may involve considering the observers' selection, training of observers and teachers, and close attention to the contexts and purposes aimed at by the observation (Unissa & Alhasan, 2024). Overall, classroom observation as a tool of higher education EFL instructors' professional development should be thoroughly planned systematically, contextually, and supported with positive feedback systems in order to exert its full influence upon the quality of teaching and teachers' development.

In the present study, an attempt is made to better comprehend how classroom observation could be used effectively in planning teacher professional development programs and what are the best practices in providing constructive, context-specific feedback that promotes ongoing professional improvement of EFL teachers at the tertiary level. The present research particularly investigated the following research questions:

Based on the classroom observations:

- (1) What are the common strengths observed among EFL teachers?
- (2) What are the weaknesses where English teachers struggle?
- (3) What is the proposed professional development program based on the weaknesses identified through observations?

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Teacher professional development

Professional development (PD) is the routine, systematic training that teachers receive to enhance their competence and abilities in their professional field (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Professional development varies with the organization and the aims of the organization, but it might be in various forms, and most often it is a combination of workshops, seminars, coaching, mentoring, and other types of assistance. Professional development could be compulsory or optional. But the long-term objective

is to equip teachers with the kind of support they require in order to improve their pedagogy and stay connected with the newest innovations in higher education (Fernandes et al., 2023). The right PD needs to be continuous, fair, and sensitive to reforms, context, curriculum, and collaboration. Students' educational quality depends on the educational quality of teachers' PD. Therefore, researchers and policymakers need to familiarize themselves with the determinants of teachers' qualifications and create effective and efficient PD processes (Mulalic, 2024).

Teachers need to be given ample space and opportunities to differentiate PD processes depending on the type of target conflicts they are facing and the level of innovation and risk-taking involved. Reforms and policies play a significant role in shaping PD processes and teacher education. Practical effectiveness and key features are important considerations in designing PD programs (Sancar et al., 2021). There are some key traits of an effective PD program for instructors in higher education. Based on the conclusions from the case study of Fernandes et al. (2023), training in PD programs should be planned and organized around pertinent subjects, with specific goals and sufficient resources for attendees. Also, through a wide range of techniques that involve active learning with modelling, the training methodology should encourage participants' active involvement. Moreover, initiatives that boost teachers' confidence, encourage the growth of research on teaching practice, and create a community of practice that offers chances for one-on-one coaching and mentoring should all support the impact of pedagogical PD on teachers' practices and conceptions.

Research has also shown that effective professional development for teachers is structured and results in changes to teacher practices and improvements in student learning outcomes (Alzahrani and Nor, 2022). Lack of common understanding between the factors involved was identified as a major challenge in professional development. Internal aspects, such as interests and attitudes of teachers, were significant for professional development (Dille & Røkenes, 2021). Extended teacher professional development programs involving active learning, feedback, and reflection have the potential to establish subject-integrated language skills and teachers' self-efficacy, improving teaching practices and language learning assistance (Heppt et al., 2022). In addition, the Lorenz et al. (2021) research confirmed that teachers' engagement in professional development workshops positively influenced their sensitization and openness toward multilingual students and their belief in the role of home languages in the acquisition of English. The research also recommended incorporating observation and feedback sessions among the teachers, as well as the availability of up-to-date materials and instructional design tools to support multilingual teaching practices. Besides, according to Mulalic (2024) findings, successful classroom teaching changes were most likely to result from professional development activities tailored to certain teaching needs and reinforced through continuous coaching and collaborative arrangements. The study also highlighted the value of consistent, contextually appropriate professional development, which improves instructors' teaching abilities and aids in their retention and professional development.

Classroom observation

Classroom observation is a tool for professional development that can play an essential role in improving teachers' performance, as they are significantly correlated. It can also be said that classroom observation is essential for both the overall growth of the students and for ongoing enhancement of teaching and learning (Reños & Pontillas, 2024). Therefore, the preparation and competence of teachers can be enhanced using the classroom observation tool as a guide for evaluating their performance and coming up with improvement plans. It helps teachers identify their strengths and weaknesses, which brings about amazing improvements in the teaching-learning process. It also promotes good attitudes among students and prevents adverse attitudes in subsequent lessons (Olugbenga, 2022). In addition, it is a useful tool for their professional development since it makes teaching more real and dependable by allowing them to do it with less pressure, reluctance, and worry. It helps with confidence building, idea sharing, productive dialogue on teaching methods, and teaching improvement. It gives instructors new

insights into well-known classroom routines, expands their toolkit of teaching techniques, and assists them in improving their instructional methods (Alam et al., 2020).

Many studies have highlighted the importance of learning through observing a colleague, with observers finding the peer observation process influential in developing their own teaching skills. According to Windsor et al. (2020), observation practices during the teaching practicum can help enhance teacher professional growth and support evidence-based discussions. To assist instructors in reflecting on their practices and engaging in constructive dialogue about learning and teaching, the study pointed out the need to create a supportive and non-judgmental environment throughout the observation process. Overall, the study emphasizes how observational methods can promote evidence-based conversations and advance teachers' professional expertise. Moreover, Dos Santos's (2020) research found that the peer observation professional development program can help pre-service teachers, especially those with limited experience, develop and refine their teaching methods. The study highlighted the importance of integrating peer observation cycles and professional training programs into teachers' development. As a result, when data was collected and presented consistently, discussions between pre-service teachers and experienced teachers became deeper and more complex. All educators can benefit from ongoing professional development and can help transform classroom social practices by employing nonjudgmental observation techniques (Windsor et al., 2022).

Additionally, it is important to conduct standardized classroom observation as a professional development technique. For evaluation and development, it enables them to record their conduct and classroom activities. Consequently, it allows educators to evaluate their instruction, recognize pedagogical gaps, and start new projects that will benefit students (Barrogo, 2020). Furthermore, classroom observation gives educators a fresh and demanding experience that enhances teaching methods and eventually helps students. By considering their students' learning preferences, educators work to integrate best practice techniques into their lesson plans, curriculum, and evaluation processes (Caratiquit & Pablo, 2021). In addition, Tarusha and Bushi's (2024) study examined how instructors felt about standardized classroom monitoring instruments. According to the findings, teachers believed that classroom observations improved their knowledge, abilities, and methods of instruction while also offering chances for professional development and fostering their general development.

Upon synthesizing the reviewed literature, it becomes clear that while the studies collectively stress the importance of well-structured, contextually relevant professional development, they vary in their assumptions about how such development most effectively impacts teaching practice. For example, Fernandes et al. (2023) and Sancar et al. (2021) emphasize the significance of organized, goal-oriented PD frameworks, whereas other research, such as Dille and Røkenes (2021) and Heppt et al. (2022), highlights the crucial role of teachers' internal dispositions—like attitudes, self-efficacy, and readiness for reflection—in determining the impact of PD. Similarly, although Mulalic (2024) attributes change to personalized coaching and classroom-based reinforcement, Lorenz et al. (2021) focuses on shifts in teachers' beliefs and openness toward multilingual learners. These similarities and differences suggest that effective PD cannot depend on a single model; instead, it requires a combination of structured design, contextual adaptation, and attention to teacher cognition. This critical integration of findings helps clarify the need for further empirical research—such as the current study—that situates PD within real classroom practices and examines how institutional processes like observation and feedback contribute to professional learning in specific EFL contexts.

Method

Design and participants

The current study adopted a qualitative thematic analysis strategy, which is best suited for analyzing patterns, meaning, and understanding in qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). There were 27 observations made in class, and these were analyzed to obtain rich and descriptive data

about the teaching practices of EFL instructors. Data collection occurred within Taif University (TU) English Language Center (ELC) setting, an institution that offers a rich language learning and teaching environment, thus an appropriate setting for an investigation of classroom practice and professional development needs.

Simple random sampling was employed in participant selection in order to ensure fairness and limit selection bias among observed teachers (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This approach increased the representativeness of the sample by creating an equal opportunity for all the teachers in the center to participate. The observers, conversely, were selected purposefully because purposeful sampling allows for selection of individuals who possess specific expertise or characteristics that are relevant to the purpose of the research (Patton, 2015). Four experienced EFL teachers from the same center were selected to serve as observers in this case. They were selected as suitable since they had higher educational levels of qualification, longer teaching experience, and more experience with pedagogic evaluation than their counterparts.

This combination of random sampling for participants and purposeful sampling for observers ensured methodological robustness. On the one hand, random selection of observed teachers increased the credibility and trustworthiness of results by minimizing potential bias. On the other hand, purposeful selection of very experienced observers lent greater solidity to the validity of the class observation data, as experienced teachers are in a better position to value nuanced teaching strengths and weaknesses (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). By integrating the two sampling methods, the study pitted representativeness against expertise and ended up generating valid and significant understandings of the teaching methods at the ELC.

Data collection

The instrument employed for data collection was a structured of classroom-observation form which was conducted by the administrators of ELC at Taif University. This observation tool has six key aspects of instructional practices, which include lesson organization, teacher–student interaction, use of teaching strategies, language proficiency, and classroom management. To ensure its accuracy and reliability, the observation tool was validated and verified by specialists in language education and teacher development. Their review ensured that the tool aligned with established standards for effective teaching in EFL settings.

All teachers were observed once for each participating teacher during the second semester of the 2022–2023 academic year. Conducting observations within the same semester provided a uniform, comparable snapshot of instructional performance across teachers, minimizing variability due to curricular timing or assessment cycles. Immediately after each observation, the observer prepared a comprehensive report and constructive feedback for the teacher with the intention of identifying effective practices and areas for improvement. Giving feedback was not just intended to help teachers improve teaching approaches but also to foster professional growth and reflective teaching practices. Upon receiving the official and ethical approval from the institution, the researcher gained access to these observation reports to code and analyse them systematically, and to identify the prominent strengths and insistent challenges across classrooms.

Data collection

Qualitative and quantitative data are gathered through the Student Teacher Internship Exit Questionnaire (STIEQ), observation, and document analysis. The STIEQ, which comprised a combination of closed and open-ended questions, was administered as an online survey that was completed by the preservice teachers at the end of their practicum. The online survey allowed the researchers to collect data in real time, thus guaranteeing a short time frame for the collection of responses that were transferred automatically into a Google database for easy analysis (Lefever, Dal, &

Matthíasdóttir, 2007). The STIEQ items were spread over three dimensions of teaching practice, that is, professional ethics, teaching, pedagogy, and classroom management dimensions. Observations were made on the general conduct of the preservice teachers, their lesson delivery, and classroom management approaches. Observations also extended to mentors and how they endeavoured to assist the mentees. A total of eight (8) lessons taught by the preservice teachers and three (3) demonstration lessons taught by the mentors were observed. These were followed by post-lesson discussions amongst the researchers, the intern, and the mentor. The preservice teachers' pedagogical documents, inclusive of lesson plans, the scheme of work, record of marks, and the class diary, were also analysed. The three data collection approaches provided for triangulation to strengthen the validity of the findings (Hanson, Cresswell, Plano-Clarke, Petska, & Cresswell, 2005).

Data analysis

The inductive content analysis was used to analyze the data, which is generally considered to be among the most frequently utilized and rigorous techniques for qualitative research. In this method, patterns and categories are not dictated but emerge from the data itself, which allows for a more accurate description of participants' experience and practice (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). The general aim in this analysis is to generate a detailed yet concise description of the phenomenon under study. Through constant identification, clustering, and interpretation of concepts, the analysis creates meaningful categories that reflect the essence of the data. These categories are usually employed to develop theoretical models or conceptual frameworks that are utilized to contribute to academic knowledge and guide professional practice.

In this study, the researcher employed a multi-stage process to ensure the accuracy and credibility of the analysis. Initially, the classroom observation reports were read several times with diligence to achieve immersion and familiarity with the content. During this stage, the researcher initiated preliminary comments and underlined significant pieces of text that conveyed repeated ideas or concerns. Open coding was the second stage, whereby labels were assigned to meaningful data units. Each code was subsequently put into a category and assigned a descriptive label that represented its conceptual essence. This was an iterative and not linear process, and the researcher went back through existing codes and expanded them with new insights. After coding was finished, the researcher collated the codes into subcategories based on their similarities and affinities. Similar categories in meaning were merged, with distinctive categories reserved to preserve specificity and detail. This aggregation and comparison continued until a clear set of broad categories was obtained, which captured the prominent themes in the data (Sheydayi & Dadashpoor, 2023).

Ultimately, the inductive content analysis yielded categories that not only captured the positive but also the negative aspects of teachers' classroom practices. Not only did these findings offer a systematic account of the observed teaching behaviors, but they also yielded pragmatic implications for professional development. The categories served as the foundation for the creation of an EFL teachers' training program that addressed their specific needs, therefore ensuring that the program was contextually appropriate, evidence-informed, and directly linked with problems experienced in real classroom settings. Through doing this, the analysis not only enriched scholarly understanding of teaching practice but also yielded practical recommendations for improving instructional quality and supporting teachers' ongoing improvement.

Trustworthiness

The study methodological precision was maintained by following recognized standards of trustworthiness in qualitative research, such as credibility, dependability, confirmability, and reflexivity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017). Credibility was enhanced by employing trained observers and ensuring they reached a consensus. Before the classroom observations, four observers convened to

review the observation form and discuss its indicators, leading to increased commonality in the definition of behaviors as well as minimizing subjectivity. The codes were regularly reviewed with several iterations, which increased the internal consistency (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008) of the findings. Confirmability of the findings was obtained by maintaining an audit trail that documented coding decisions, category construction, and analytic memos during the study (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Reflexivity was also considered through the researcher reflecting upon their own assumptions and potential biases when interpreting data, which meant that evidence came from the data rather than the researchers' own expectations. In sum, these approaches enhanced the credibility and explanatory power of the study qualitative analysis.

Findings

The primary purpose of this study is to investigate the strengths and weaknesses of EFL teachers in higher education through classroom observations and based on these findings, to design a context-specific professional development (PD) program. Accordingly, the findings of this study were organized into two major sections: (1) the themes that emerged from the analysis of classroom observations, and (2) the proposed professional development program that directly responds to these findings. The first section presented the results of the thematic analysis and was further divided into two main subsections: the strengths and the weaknesses of EFL teachers, as illustrated in Table 1. Each main theme was supported by a set of sub-themes, which were derived systematically through inductive content analysis of the classroom observation reports. This thematic structuring allowed for a nuanced understanding of the teachers' pedagogical practices, highlighting not only what was being done effectively but also what required further support and development (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017).

The second section outlined the proposed professional development program, which was designed as a direct response to the identified themes of weaknesses. The program was structured to build on the teachers' existing strengths while addressing their areas of weakness, thereby promoting balanced growth and sustained professional improvement. In doing so, the study contributes not only to the diagnosis of current teaching practices but also to the practical enhancement of instructional quality by offering evidence-based recommendations.

Strengths of EFL teachers

Instructional strategies

Under this theme, three sub-themes were identified by the researcher from the analysis of the notes that were written in the classroom observation tool. The instructional strategies theme was categorized into (1) Teaching Techniques, (2) Technology Integration, and (3) Resources and Materials. Some interesting teaching methods were observed, such as an effective lead-in strategy, use of flash cards, skimming and scanning, scaffolding, use of active methods, use of model text, use of writing tasks, critical thinking, prior knowledge activation, use of MFP (Meaning, Form, Pronunciation), and use of examples and models. One observer noted that: "*The instructor designs activities and uses effective flash cards that help to activate the learners and help them to practice.*" Thus, the observers noticed that EFL teachers were implementing these techniques in the classroom, which showed that the teachers were trying to use different techniques to raise students' level of understanding.

Technology integration sub-theme was only observed with two teachers who used the projector to present the course book and used short video clips. One observer wrote a comment for a teacher mentioning that: "*You employed your projector very well with the features of Evolve App.*" Therefore, no creativity was observed in using technology inside the classroom of EFL teachers. This means that EFL teachers need to be trained more in how to implement technology in their classrooms.

Table 1
Strengths and Weaknesses of EFL Teachers: Themes and Sub-themes

Themes	Definition	Sub-themes	N. of Codes
Strengths of EFL Teachers			
Instructional Strategies	It refers to the strategies, instruments, and materials teachers employ to support learning, such as innovative instructional techniques, technological integration, and supplementary resources.	Teaching Technique	15
		Technology Integration	6
		Resources and Materials	3
Lesson Planning and Delivery	It includes how courses are organized and delivered, emphasizing clear objectives, logical order, and engaging delivery methods.	Lesson Structure	4
		Lesson Delivery	6
Classroom Management	It relates to how well teachers manage the classroom environment, keep things in order, and increase student productivity and time efficiency.	Student Engagement	12
		Time management	3
Teacher Qualities and Relationships	It includes professional and personal qualities, including subject-matter knowledge, student rapport, and cooperative methods that foster a positive learning environment.	Teacher Attributes	7
		Collaboration and Interaction	3
Weaknesses of EFL Teachers			
Instructional Strategies	It highlights the over-reliance on textbooks, the lack of engagement strategies, and the absence of efficient teaching methods for grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and listening.	Teaching Techniques	7
		Engagement Strategies	4
		Resources and Materials	4
Lesson Planning	It refers to poor lesson planning, ambiguous goals, and random sequencing that can confuse students and impair their comprehension.	Lesson Structure	5
Classroom Management	It indicates issues with properly controlling class time, encouraging student involvement, and giving feedback, which reduces lesson productivity.	Interaction between Students	3
		Time management	2
Technology and Adaptation	It captures how digital resources and online teaching techniques are used minimally and inconsistently, especially when it comes to improving student engagement and productive abilities.	Technology Use	2
		Online Teaching	2

Using extra resources and materials inside the EFL classroom is an essential element of effective language teaching. It can help create a richer, more dynamic learning environment and address various challenges that language learners face. Under this sub-theme, several materials were observed, such as real-life material, external teaching resources, use of visual aids, use of annotated text, and use of color-coding. As one observer commented, *“She presented the lesson using different materials in addition to the main book such as presented some of information on word document and watching videos on YouTube.”* Utilizing such materials helps teachers to facilitate the content and consequently assists students in understanding easily.

Lesson planning and delivery

This theme has two sub-themes which were identified from the analysis of the classroom observation notes. They were (1) Lesson Structure and (2) Lesson Delivery. Structuring the lesson before delivering is a very important step. Although it was not done by all observed teachers, there were some indicators of lesson structure, such as smooth and organized presentation of the lesson, clarity of lesson and stage aims, and a good lesson plan. For example, an observer said that: *“I could follow your lesson aim overall. I found the stage aims very clear.”* Some interesting delivery techniques were observed in EFL classrooms, such as starting the lesson in an attractive way with a short story, successful pre-teach vocabulary stage, effective lead-in stage, use of evidence and support for ideas, and elicitation of learners’ ideas. For instance, one observer mentioned that: *“You started the lead in stage effectively by asking your students about the first photo of the unit.”*

Classroom management

Classroom management is one of the essential skills of any teacher. If the classroom is managed well, academic engagement will be increased. Two sub-themes were identified under this theme, which were (1) Student Engagement and (2) Time Management.

EFL teachers need to be aware of the significance of engaging students in classroom activities. It was observed that they use several techniques to do so, such as encouraging students’ participation, activating students’ confidence, student-centered instruction, use of ICQs and CCQs, pair feedback, open class feedback, and monitoring. These strategies were effective when implemented correctly; for instance, one observer said that: *“students participated actively and confidently, demonstrating that they were not afraid of making mistakes”*, which indicates a supportive classroom climate and lowered affective filters. However, these practices were not implemented by all observed teachers in a proper way.

Time management sub-theme has been repeated only five times in the analysis of the observation notes. This means that this basic element of teaching is perhaps not being given the priority that it should be within the EFL classroom. For example, an observer mentioned that: *“I noticed you manage your time effectively.”* Allocating clear timing for each task helped maintain lesson flow and supported students in staying focused and aware of expectations. Therefore, time management is an important ability for both teachers and students in language learning since it influences the quality of lessons taught, the volume of material covered, and the ways in which students engage with the material.

Teacher qualities and relationships

Based on the analysis of observations, this theme was categorized into Teacher Attributes and Collaboration and Interaction. Teacher attributes has been observed very clearly across the teachers. Observers mentioned that: *“Teachers consistently demonstrated a clear and effective voice in the classroom,”* which supported comprehension and maintained students’ attention. They also showed *“a significant rapport with their students,”* reflected in the warm, respectful interactions and the ease with which learners approached them for clarification. Moreover, they were encouraging teachers, adding

humor to their lessons, and finding creative ways to bring learning into the real world, which displayed an engaging teaching style. They also showed their subject matter expertise, which is one of the most important teacher attributes that should be visible in the EFL context.

Due to the large number of students, it was observed that EFL teachers tried to use some collaborative learning to promote the relationship between students. For instance, *“Teachers employed a mix of interaction patterns, including individual work, pair tasks, and plenary discussions,”* ensuring varied opportunities for learners to practice language and participate actively. These interaction patterns helped maintain student engagement and facilitated the exchange of ideas among learners. However, this element needs more attention to implement various and creative collaborative learning techniques.

Weaknesses of EFL teachers

Instructional strategies

Although this theme was mentioned previously in the strengths of EFL teachers, it is also observed to be one of the weaknesses of some teachers. Three sub-themes were identified by the researcher from the analysis of the classroom observation. They were (1) Teaching Techniques, (2) Engagement Strategies, and (3) Resources and Materials.

It was noticed that EFL teachers had some weaknesses in using different teaching techniques in some areas of the English language. These included teaching grammar strategies, effective vocabulary instruction, pronunciation practice, teaching listening skills, explanation of new vocabulary, developing independent learning skills/self-directed learning, and target language clarification. For example, one observer said that: *“Using MFP to explain grammar and vocabulary would be better.”* Another observer mentioned that: *“Let Ss. Listen for one time to do the listen for gist activity that will save time and improve the listening skill of the Ss.”*

It was observed that some teachers did not use techniques to engage students, such as activating learners' prior knowledge by using prompts like pictures and effectively eliciting questions. They also did not provide students with more opportunities to express their ideas or participate meaningfully in classroom interactions. Moreover, some teachers did not incorporate collaborative structures—for example, one observer commented: *“working groups that help students work effectively,”* and increase participation. Therefore, this sub-theme needs to be focused on, as involving students is one of the important elements of effective learning.

Although resources and materials sub-theme was observed previously as a strength by some teachers, it was noticed that other teachers used only the coursebook rather than using different learning materials and activities to keep the students engaged and active. Several observation notes highlighted that teachers *“should use different learning materials and activities rather than depending solely on the coursebook,”* as these additional resources can make lessons more dynamic and responsive to learners' needs. Therefore, this area needs improvement to ensure that classroom resources support active, meaningful learning experiences.

Lesson planning and delivery

Under this theme, one sub-theme was identified by the researcher from the analysis of the classroom observation tool. This sub-theme was lesson structure. Although it was mentioned previously in the strengths, it still needs more effort by the teachers to make students stay on track and prevent missed concepts. Structuring the lesson was not consistently demonstrated by all observed teachers. In several cases, teachers did not state clear lesson objectives. For example, it was noted in some observations that teachers should *“pay more attention to stating clear lesson objectives”* at the beginning of the class. Additionally, some teachers did not begin the lesson with a purposeful warm-up, such as *“warming up the class by reminding students about what they learned in the previous lesson,”* a practice that helps activate prior knowledge and prepare learners for new content. If a class is poorly structured, the students

are likely to be confused and might not know what they are supposed to learn or do. Students will become confused and struggle to grasp the significance and intent of the material being taught if there are no apparent instructional goals.

Classroom management

Keeping the classroom atmosphere good and productive, where students are able to concentrate and participate without hindrance, relies on effective classroom management. Establishing routines, making clear expectations, and employing off-task behavior management strategies are all elements of guaranteeing classes are trouble-free. Classroom management was observed as a weakness in some of the EFL classrooms. Two sub-themes were identified, which were (1) Interaction and Feedback and (2) Time Management.

Classroom student-to-student interaction encourages teamwork, where they can exchange views, problem-solve in groups, and gain a better understanding of the subject. Furthermore, such student-to-student interaction provides students with a feeling of belongingness and security. This component was not implemented in all observed classes. In several cases, *“teachers did not verify interaction patterns, such as pair work, group work, or whole-class discussions,”* as noted by some observers, even though these techniques are essential for promoting communicative language use. Moreover, some teachers relied on a single approach for checking answers, whereas *“using a variety of checking techniques would have been more effective,”* as mentioned by one of the observers. These gaps indicate a need for systematic training in interaction management and feedback variation to ensure students benefit from richer communicative opportunities.

Time management is crucial in EFL classes. Instructors of some classes that were under observation exhibited poor time management by taking extensive periods to carry out a single activity and leaving minimal time for others. This inequity affected the students’ entire learning experience by reducing important themes to mere hurried or incomplete undertakings, thereby reducing the effectiveness of the lesson. The use of more efficient answer-checking routines—such as whole-class response, peer checking, or quick digital polling—would have supported smoother transitions and better time distribution. As noted in the observations, *“a more varied approach to checking students’ answers would have been more effective and would have saved valuable class time,”* thereby enhancing overall lesson flow.

Technology and adaptation

Under this theme, two sub-themes were identified by the researcher from the analysis of the classroom observation notes. They are (1) Technology Use and (2) Online Teaching. Although some teachers were excellent at implementing technology in teaching, other teachers failed to do so. The observer teachers noticed that using technology for teaching productive skills to enhance students’ learning was absent in some of the EFL classrooms. One of the observers said: *“You should use technology for productive skills to enhance their learning more than using books only.”* It was also noted that teachers rarely used technology to provide students with additional vocabulary support, and in cases where it was attempted, *“the effort to use technology to provide extra words for writing was weak,”* as noted by one of the observers.

Teaching online has many challenges. One of them is getting students engaged with their teachers. This was also seen as one of the weaknesses in EFL classrooms. It was evident in some of the observed online classes, where the teacher *“tried to get students engaged, though it was difficult for her to do so with online learners.”* Limited interaction, passive student participation, and the absence of dynamic digital tools further hindered active learning. These observations indicate that teachers require targeted support in online pedagogical strategies, including the use of interactive features, breakout rooms, digital collaboration tools, and structured online engagement routines.

The proposed professional development program

After a thorough review of the weaknesses observed in EFL classrooms, a professional development program was proposed. This PD program addresses the main themes of weaknesses found in EFL classrooms through targeted workshops, training sessions, and ongoing support. As a result, the program focuses on instructional strategies, lesson planning, classroom management, technology and adaptation, and ongoing support and development. The overall design is guided by Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) to increase meaningful communication; Focus on Form to integrate language accuracy within communicative tasks; Backward Design for alignment and clarity; formative assessment and feedback for learning; and coaching/professional learning communities (PLCs) for sustained transfer to practice (Long, 1991; Nunan, 2004; Wiggins & McTighe, 2005; Black & Wiliam, 1998; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Table 2 shows this program in detail.

The professional development program that was suggested was carefully designed to address the specific needs revealed by the classroom observations. Each of the categories—Instructional Strategies, Lesson Planning, Classroom Management, Technology and Adaptation, and Ongoing Support—was not selected arbitrarily. Rather, each category was developed based on specific needs revealed by classroom practice. For example, a lack of clear explanations of teaching instructions, insufficient techniques for enriching students' vocabularies, and insufficient practice in pronunciation were some of the reasons why specific training in grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation was included. Similarly, a lack of use of students' prior knowledge, insufficient use of warmers, and a lack of clear lesson objectives were some of the reasons why the training in Lesson Planning was included. A lack of engaging students, inconsistent interaction patterns, and an overreliance on teacher talk were some of the reasons why the training in Classroom Management was included. Similarly, insufficient use of technology, particularly in productive skills, was one of the reasons why the training in Technology and Adaptation was included. Furthermore, the fact that many of the challenges were systemic and that change was a long-term process rather than a short-term training fix meant that the PD program was designed to incorporate elements such as mentorship and PLCs to facilitate ongoing professional growth. As such, the PD program was designed as a direct response to the actual needs that were identified, such that each and every workshop and training piece was logically and pedagogically linked to the real-world challenges that were identified in the classrooms.

The design of the professional development program is informed by well-established theories in second language instruction and professional learning to ensure that it is not just a list of training ideas, but a replicable and systematic pedagogical model. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) are the underpinning theories for enhancing student engagement and communication, especially in classrooms where interaction patterns such as pair work and group work are not well implemented. The application of the Focus on Form principles is incorporated to address the problems identified in grammar accuracy and to assist teachers in effectively applying grammar accuracy in task-based lessons. The addition of Backward Design helps to address one of the weaknesses identified in the lessons, where the objectives and outcomes are not clearly defined, and lessons are poorly structured. Theories of formative assessment are applied in the training of providing feedback and assessing students' understanding, which was poorly done in the lessons. Lastly, coaching cycles, peer observations, and PLCs are informed by social learning theories and the Communities of Practice approach, offering teachers sustained support in the implementation of changes rather than just relying on workshop-based learning. All these theories ensure that the PD program is coherent and research-informed in its approach and has the potential to produce significant improvements in instruction.

Table 2.
The Proposed Professional Development Program

Category	Objective	Workshops & Training	Examples & Methodology
Instructional Strategies	Improving teaching techniques, enhancing student engagement, and refining methods for grammar, vocabulary instruction, and pronunciation practice	Effective Grammar Instruction:	
		1. Interactive grammar exercises and context-based teaching techniques	1. “Input Flood + Task”: Provide a short email rich in target form (e.g., past perfect for experiences). Students complete a task (choose the best applicant for a job and justify using evidence from emails), then do a quick noticing phase (underline target forms) and a brief rule formulation. Methodology: TBLT + Focus on Form.
		2. Integrating technology into teaching grammar	2. “Corpus Quick-Check”: Students construct example sentences and compare real usage (e.g., "used to" vs. "would") using a learner-friendly corpus website (e.g., COCA/Lextutor/YouGlish). Methodology: Data-Driven Learning (DDL) within CLT.
		Vocabulary Instruction & Enrichment:	
		1. Strategies for teaching vocabulary effectively	1. “Word Families & Collocations Map”: Students create a semantic-collocational map for a target word (e.g., “effect”: strong/lasting/negative impact; verb–noun patterns). Methodology: Lexical Approach + CLT.
		2. Innovative vocabulary activities	2. “Collocation Detective”: Pairs identify collocations from a brief real text and then use them again in a role-play. Methodology: CLT
		3. Combining the teaching of vocabulary with other skills	3. “Listening-to-Speaking Lexical Lift”: Students listen for the main idea or specific details, then use the new chunks to fill in the information gaps in a speaking mode. Methodology: CLT
		Pronunciation Practice:	
		1. Techniques for teaching pronunciation	1. “Shadowing with Chunking”: Brief dialogue in which students indicate stress and thought groups before shadowing at a slower pace compared to typical. Methodology: Communicative Phonology; guided practice → communicative use.
		2. Use of phonetic symbols and tools	2. “Minimal Pairs + YouGlish”: Students verify pronunciation for example of /ɪ/ vs /i:/ in authentic clips and record their own on mobile for self-assessment. Methodology: Form-focused practice within CLT.
		3. Creative activities to enhance pronunciation	3. “Jazz Chants for Rhythm”: A brief chant that practices stress-timed rhythm by reusing course vocabulary, followed by a role-play that uses the same rhythm. Methodology: PPP (Presentation–Practice–Production).

Category	Objective	Workshops & Training	Examples & Methodology
		<p>Listening Skills:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Strategies for teaching listening 2. Creating attractive listening activities 3. Using authentic listening resources 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. “Prediction–Verification–Repair”: Pre-listening prediction; first listen (gist); second (details); third (repair miscomprehension). Methodology: Strategy-based instruction 2. “Dictogloss with Twist”: Students take notes, recreate in pairs, compare to the original, and concentrate on target forms or lexis. Methodology: TBLT; Focus on Form during reconstruction. 3. “Micro-Authentic Clips”: Teachers play 30–60s clips (announcements, reels). Students extract key information, then complete an information gap task. Methodology: CLT.
		<p>Developing Independent Learning Skills:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Encouraging self-directed learning 2. Strategies to promote learner autonomy 3. Tools and resources for self-directed learning 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. “Weekly Self-Set Micro-Goal”: Students select a single micro-goal (for example, 20 collocations each week), schedule the time and method, and record their progress in a learning journal. Methodology: Strategy training + reflective practice. 2. “Choice Boards”: Students choose from a menu (podcast + summary; article + vocabulary map; AI drill + reflection) and practice with criteria. Methodology: Universal Design for Learning (UDL); CLT tasks. 3. “Spaced Repetition Decks”: Create a Quizlet/Anki deck with collocations, practice retrieval every week, and verify accuracy with a peer. Methodology: Cognitive strategy training.
		<p>Diverse Teaching Methods:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Using a variety of techniques and implementing alternative activities 2. Adapting activities to learning styles 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. “Stations Rotation”: Make the four stations activity (listening micro-task, pronunciation drill, lexicogrammar puzzle, communicative role-play). Methodology: TBLT mini tasks. 2. “Tiered Tasks”: Using the same objective, but different scaffolds (e.g., sentence starters, visuals, challenge add-ons). Methodology: UDL + scaffolding (Vygotsky’s ZPD).
Lesson Planning	Improving the clarity and reliability of lesson plans	<p>Effective Lesson Planning:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Writing clear objectives. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. SMART objective template: “By the end, students will be able to [function] by [task] with [criteria] (e.g., 85% collocation accuracy).” Methodology: Backward Design.

Category	Objective	Workshops & Training	Examples & Methodology
Classroom Management	Improving student engagement, enhancing feedback mechanisms, and refining interaction patterns	2. Creating lessons for impact	2. “Task First”: Start with a communicative task (e.g., plan a trip under constraints), then teach the language needed that emerges. Methodology: TBLT.
		3. Aligning activities with goals	3. “Alignment Check Grid”: For each activity, indicate which objective it serves and what evidence it yields; delete misaligned steps. Methodology: Curriculum alignment routine.
		Warm-Up Activities:	
		1. Designing engaging warm-up activities	1. “Picture Reveal Challenge”: students guess the image using topic vocabulary. Methodology: CLT; multimodal learning; top-down processing.
		2. Activating prior knowledge	2. “3–2–1 Quick Recall”: students retrieve key ideas from the previous lesson. Methodology: Retrieval practice; schema theory; metacognitive training.
		3. Enjoyable and relevant activities	3. “Speed Chat Circles”: Students take turns responding to funny, relevant questions. Methodology: CLT; fluency-based instruction; affective filter lowering
		Student Engagement:	
		Increasing participation, engaging various learners, creating a dynamic classroom.	“Think–Pair–Share + Cold Call with Prompts”: Structured solo reflection, pair exchange, then whole-class share; teacher uses supportive cold-call with sentence stems. Methodology: CLT discourse routines
		Feedback and Assessment:	
		Giving effective feedback, checking understanding, using formative & summative assessments	“Two Stars and a Wish + Success Criteria”: Students use a can-do checklist to give peer feedback on a speaking task focusing on target features (e.g., use of modals). Methodology: Formative assessment
		Interaction Patterns:	
		Promoting productive interactions, managing interaction patterns, encouraging student-to-student interaction and collaboration activities	“Information Gap Carousel”: Students rotate with partial information to co-construct a solution; teacher monitors for language to address in a Focus-on-Form debrief. Methodology: CLT/TBLT

Category	Objective	Workshops & Training	Examples & Methodology
Technology & Adaptation	Utilizing technology effectively in teaching and addressing the challenges of online teaching	Using Technology in the Classroom:	
		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Language teaching apps 2. Digital resources 3. AI and language teaching 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. "Quizlet Live—Collocations Race": Teams must match collocations to complete the subsequent speaking challenge. Methodology: CLT output 2. "YouGlish Micro-Noticing": Learners search for a target phrase, note pronunciation/rhythm, and reuse it in a role-play. Methodology: Authentic input + communicative reuse 3. "AI as a Drafting Partner": Students prompt an AI to generate example sentences for target chunks, then edit for accuracy/naturalness using a provided checklist; teacher models prompt quality and bias/accuracy checks. Methodology: Process writing; critical digital literacy
Ongoing Support & Development	Providing continuous support and opportunities for professional growth	Online Teaching:	
		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Overcoming online challenges 2. Online engagement activities 3. Virtual classroom best practices 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. "Structured Breakout rooms with Roles": Teachers provide a clear task, time, roles (leader, language monitor), and share a document for accountability. Methodology: Community of Inquiry —social/cognitive presence 2. "Poll–Predict–Discuss": Discussion is sparked by a brief poll, followed by breakout debate and plenary synthesis. Methodology: CLT 3. "Multimodal Input & Captioning": Short video with captions, visual gloss, and post-task chat reflection. Methodology: UDL + listening strategy instruction
Ongoing Support & Development	Providing continuous support and opportunities for professional growth	Mentorship Program:	
		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Novice and experienced teacher pairing 2. Continuous classroom observation 3. Sharing best practices 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. "For a 6-week cycle, a new teacher is paired with an experienced mentor." They co-design one lesson per cycle, observe each other's lessons, and discuss lesson planning during their weekly meetings. 2. Using simplified classroom observation rubric, the mentor observes one lesson every two weeks with an emphasis on student engagement, interaction patterns, goal clarity, and feedback utilization. One practical next step for the novice is determined during a 20-minute coaching conversation following the lesson 3. Every month, mentors and mentees get together for "Best Practice Sharing Circles," where each instructor shares a successful activity, acts it out, and gives resources for others to modify
		Peer Observations:	

Category	Objective	Workshops & Training	Examples & Methodology
		1. Scheduling class observations	1. A rotating observation plan is agreed upon by the teachers, whereby each teacher observes two colleagues per semester. Pre-planned observations include a goal, a focal region, and an observation tool.
		2. Constructive feedback	2. After an observation, teachers meet for a 15-minute feedback session using the “Praise–Question–Polish” protocol: Praise: <i>Highlight strengths</i> . Question: <i>Ask clarifying or reflective questions</i> . Polish: <i>Suggest one improvement</i>
		3. Peer learning	3. During monthly peer-learning meetings, teachers bring student work samples, discuss challenges (e.g., vocabulary retention), and collaboratively design one activity to address a shared issue.
		Professional Learning Communities (PLCs):	
		1. Collaborative groups	1. Teachers are grouped by grade level or skill focus (e.g., listening, speaking). Each PLC selects a shared goal, such as “increase student-student interaction by 20%,” and collects evidence over the semester.
		2. Strategy and resource sharing	2. Every two weeks, PLC members bring one resource (e.g., a listening strategy activity) and explain: how they used it, what student response looked like, and how it could be improved. They can create a shared digital folder to store all materials
		Online Courses & Webinars:	
		1. Access to online PD courses	1. Teachers receive access to high-quality PD platforms (e.g., British Council, Coursera, TESOL). Courses align with observed needs such as task-based learning, teaching pronunciation, and digital pedagogy
		2. Webinars on emerging trends	2. Teachers attend monthly webinars on topics such as: AI in language teaching, Multimodal Instruction, and Gamified Learning. Teachers reflect afterward using a provided reflection guide
		3. Continuous learning opportunities	3. Teachers maintain a “PD Portfolio,” collecting certificates, notes, and examples of classroom application. End-of-semester sharing sessions allow teachers to showcase new practices.

Discussion

This study set out to explore the strengths and weaknesses of EFL teachers in higher education at Taif University through classroom observations and based on these insights, propose a professional development program tailored to their needs. The findings demonstrated that teachers employed a variety of effective instructional strategies, demonstrated strong personal attributes, and made good use of supplementary materials. However, challenges were also identified in areas such as consistent lesson planning, classroom management, technology integration, and student engagement. These findings, which align with prior research, emphasize that professional development must be both strength-based and need-driven, addressing observed weaknesses while enhancing existing competencies (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Fernandes et al., 2023). For instance, while some teachers effectively incorporated teaching techniques such as scaffolding and active learning, others showed difficulty in teaching grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, an issue echoed in Heppt et al. (2022), who highlight the importance of PD in reinforcing subject-integrated language skills.

The limited and sometimes ineffective use of technology observed in this study aligns with previous research showing that many EFL teachers still struggle to integrate digital tools meaningfully into instruction (Unissa & Alhasan, 2024). In the current digital era, technology integration is not only a pedagogical enhancement but also a necessity to foster learner engagement. Research has shown that PD programs incorporating digital literacy training can empower teachers to use technology innovatively to support language learning (Handayani & Fithriani, 2024). Similarly, weaknesses in classroom management and lesson structuring observed in this study are consistent with Tarusha and Bushi's (2024) findings that inadequate planning and ineffective management strategies reduce student participation and limit overall instructional effectiveness. This highlights the importance of targeted PD that supports teachers in setting clear objectives, designing engaging activities, and establishing effective feedback and interaction patterns.

On the other hand, the observed strengths—such as teachers' subject expertise, rapport with students, and use of supplementary materials—mirror earlier studies which emphasize that strong teacher-student relationships and diverse resources enhance student motivation and learning outcomes (Lorenz et al., 2021; Rozimela et al., 2025). By leveraging these advantages via professional development, professional training is positioned as a means of innovation and progress rather than as remedial action.

Overall, the research indicates that effective professional growth must be ongoing, situation-specific, and reciprocal. The application of peer observation, mentoring, and reflection suggested in Acar et al. (2023) and concluded from the findings of the current study can promote sustainable communities of practice to support long-term professional development. Additional research also emphasizes artificial intelligence studies to enhance language teaching, with a note that future teacher professional development must include AI-driven adaptive learning tools and personalized feedback (Zhang & Zou, 2024). Situating the findings within the larger literature, this research contributes to growing recognition that teacher professional development should be multi-pronged with an emphasis on instruction, classroom management, infusion of technology, and reflective teaching. The proposed PD program, developed in conformity with the findings, presents a structured and evidence-based framework for guiding Saudi EFL teachers at higher education towards better student learning outcomes.

Conclusion

The current research investigated higher education EFL teachers' strengths and weaknesses through classroom observation and proposed a professional development program based on the identified needs. The findings revealed that while teachers utilized effective instruction, effective student-teacher relations, and proper application of supplementary materials, there were critical problems in lesson preparation, classroom management, use of technology, and the engagement of students in interactive

learning. By connecting these results to the literature, it is evident that professional development performs best when it is context-bound, continuous, and reflective (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Heppt et al., 2022). The PD program proposed in this paper covers these priorities by offering targeted workshops, mentorship, peer observations, and technology training, thereby ensuring that teachers build on their strengths and systematically address their weaknesses.

The study contributes to the growing body of research on EFL teacher development by providing evidence-based insights from the Saudi higher education context and by designing a structured, locally responsive PD framework. Importantly, it reinforces the idea that PD should not only aim to remedy gaps in practice but also foster innovation, collaboration, and long-term professional growth (Zhang & Zou, 2024). The findings carry several implications. Teachers are encouraged to adopt reflective practices and expand their use of interactive strategies and digital tools. In addition, universities should embed sustained PD opportunities into institutional policy and create professional learning communities that support collaboration and shared growth. Furthermore, policymakers may consider linking PD to teacher evaluation systems to promote career development and recognize professional growth as a key aspect of quality assurance. At the same time, teacher education programs need to place greater emphasis on practical classroom management, technology integration, and strategies for fostering learner autonomy.

Future study, however, might further this direction by investigating the longitudinal effect of the designed PD program as well as considering the AI integration and digital learning tool adoption in the English language teaching and learning context to investigate other contexts. By attending to these implications, professional development can go beyond mere training to enter the realm of a transformational experience that prepares EFL instructors for changing demands in higher education and for enhancing conditions for student learning across a variety of contexts. Ultimately, the significance of professional development resides in the dynamic approach of fostering adaptive, reflexive, and innovative language educators who can appropriately respond to the constantly changing needs of language education. The long-term investment in teacher development will raise the standard of teaching and produce better academic results; this is an important component of a more comprehensive system.

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